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The Modern Decorator

His Inspiration and His Ideals

An address delivered before the Annual Convention of Master House Painters and Decorators of Pennsylvania, at York, Pa., on January 19th, 1905. Revised from the Official Stenographic Notes.

BY

H. S. QUILLIN

Advertising Manager for the FAB-RI-KO-NA Mills

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THE MODERN DECORATOR

HIS INSPIRATION AND HIS IDEALS

After a joking reference to the fact that he had been called upon to furnish a speech upon the spur of the moment, the speaker said :

The thing I have in mind to say to you, gentlemen, is simply this : in all your conventions, while you consider very fully the practical subjects,—those subjects which relate to the practical details of your business—you generally miss, so it seems to me, one element which ought to have a place in every such convention. I mean, gentlemen, the element of inspiration. After all, the best of life is not made up of practical details. There are some other things that are necessary if we are to make practical details effective. The man who spends day after day in the grind of practical details becomes sooner or later a mere machine for the turning out of so much labor, and that labor will become to that man a deadening drudgery unless there is in it and above it, and all through it, the inspiration needed to keep him up to a higher plane.

Each of you gentlemen is, to a greater or less extent, an artist. Every decorator, every house painter, every man who contributes in any way to the ornamentation of a building, is, or ought to be, something of an artist. And art is inspiration. No man can be an artist who deals solely or principally with practical details. There must be, somewhere and somehow, that which lifts him above the practical details ; which makes those details simply a means to a higher end. Understand me, gentlemen. I appreciate

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the vital importance of the practical phases of our craft. The man who is neglectful of practical details is apt to be like a spirit without a body, and his business is sooner or later "up in the air." But, even a spirit without a body has one advantage over a body without a spirit. The one is alive, at any rate, while the other is dead.

The man who "sees visions and dreams dreams" may seem to the practical man like a fanatic or a fool; but let us remember, gentlemen, that it is these same fanatics, these poets and artists, to whom Beauty makes her most sacred revelations, and it is they who translate these revelations into terms intelligible to the more practical souls.

There is today a great Art movement which had its birth in the hearts of certain men who were not the most practical of men—that is, as we limit the word "practical." At first it seemed visionary and fantastical, but for more that a decade now it has been increasing in influence and appreciation. It is full of new ideas and ideals. It is making many of the older ideas and ideals passé and obsolete. It is bringing new and splendid inspiration into the thinking and feeling of men. It is a part of the great intellectual and spiritual uplift which has marked the experience of civilized humanity in these recent days.

It was my privilege to spend some weeks at St. Louis, writing up the decorative features of the great Exposition, and I was greatly interested to see how the new thinking and feeling of the New Art were everywhere embodied in the work shown there by the foremost decorative artists in the world. Walter Crane, of England; Albert Besnard, of Paris; Edward Cuypers, of Holland; Baes, of Brussels; Pavezi, of Italy; Paul Horti, of Hungary; Hokkai Takashima, of Japan; the long list of German and Austrian artists whose work was so splendidly set forth, and our own American representatives,—all these men, each one standing in the very front rank of modern designers and

decorators, gave testimony to their faith in the New Art principles, and proved their faith by their works.

It is this movement, gentlemen, this new, world-wide and revolutionary movement, with which we must keep in touch. It will quicken our art perceptions, revive our flagging enthusiasm, give us a higher, broader, clearer vision, and make us better craftsmen by making us better artists.

Wherever one went at the World's Fair he found that the old ideals had been transformed by the new life which has come into the decorative arts.

The keynote of it all is simplicity. This does not mean merely a lack of complexity.

By simplicity is meant, first of all, individuality. Instead of following blindly the period decorations of the past, buildings and rooms are now being designed according to the purpose for which those rooms or those buildings are created. In the construction of a building they take into consideration.—even the architects, you know, are doing that now,—they take into consideration the purposes of the building, and try to so construct it architecturally that the sight of the building from the outside will suggest, or at least be fully consistent with, the purpose for which the building is designed. And when you come to the rooms in the house, intelligent decorators try to give each room an individual touch. In a dwelling house, for instance, they design a parlor or drawing room as the social centre of the home, and whatever there is of decoration is made consistent with the purpose for which that room is created. In the library there are the individual touches which show that the room is designed to be a library ; in the dining room there are the characteristic touches showing that the room is intended for a dining room ; in the sleeping room, there are the dainty delicacy and restfulness of a sleeping room ; and in the nursery,

of course they fully recognize the fact that it is to be the refuge of children, and that there must be those things in the decorative work of the nursery which are appropriate to the child life. That is one thing they mean by simplicity.

Another thing they mean by simplicity is the lack of complex ornament. The decorative work of today is very simple. Those of us who were at the Fair and saw the frieze by Walter Crane,—who is really the man upon whom the mantle of Morris fell,—will remember how perfectly simple it was. Instead of an elaborate design and an elaborate color scheme, Crane simply used the long sweeping conventionalized branch, and in the centers between suspended branches, he put the various emblems of British nationality. It was all perfectly simple, and yet when you stood and looked at it you recognized that in the simplicity there was a dignity and beauty which could not have been attained by any more elaborate scheme. That is another thing they mean by simplicity.

This simplicity in the design and the execution of ornament is very desirable. The time has gone by when, especially in America, we need the fantastic ornamentation of past periods. You take the rooms of the Louis periods,—they were designed in order to fit a pleasure-loving time, a time when the people were given over,—that is, in connection with the Court at Paris,—to frivolity. They were the embodied fancies of some of the Court favorites there, such as Du Barry. They had their inspiration in the frivolous life of those devotees at the shrine of sensuality. But they are not consistent with the practical life we are living today.

Simplicity is desirable because of its restfulness. We need restfulness. Our homes are not exhibition places. They are not museums for the exhibition of art objects. They are places where we go to rest. We get nerve strain

enough in our business life. When we go home we want a restful place. For a man to have a home which he must live up to, a home in which he is bound to wear a pink dressing gown in order to be consistent with the decorations, is, I should imagine, a rather trying experience. I have never attained that place myself, and I do not expect to.

What we want in the home is restfulness; and the atmosphere of the home is affected very largely by the decorative treatment to be found there. When your eye rests upon your wall you want nothing to startle the already strained nerves, you want that which suggests the quiet and repose you hope to find in your refuge from the cares of the market place.

To this end there is a growing regard for the solid color walls. I was in the studio of one of the leading wall paper designers two or three weeks ago,—Mr. Kinkaid of New York, probably as well known as any wall paper designer in the United States,—and he was showing me the new things he was preparing for the manufacturers. It was notable that almost all the new designs are being created in either single-tone or two-tone effect. The ornamental designs in the wall paper are being made principally in two-tone effect. Instead of the startling combinations of color of a few years ago, there are now the quiet tones, subdued and restful.

People are recognizing more and more that the walls of a house are not objects of display in themselves; that the walls of a house are simply the backgrounds for the display of those things which the room contains, and for the setting out to the best advantage of the persons, as well as the objects in the room. The wall is the background. It was so recognized at the World's Fair. In all the Fine Arts buildings there was not a single wall that was not in a single-tone. If you go to Washington and visit the Cor-

coran Art Gallery,—I do not care to say whose goods are on the wall,—you will find the wall coverings are all of a single-tone,—simply a solid mass of color against which the paintings and statuary stand out as though they were pushed forward into notice. That is one accompaniment of the simplicity of today. The walls are in a single tone, in order that those things which are in the room,—the furniture, draperies, paintings and other art objects,—will stand out against that wall.

You take the wall with profuse design all over it, and you put a painting up against it. In the first place, the painting cuts the design all to pieces. Not only that, but the combination of color in the design conflicts with the combinations of color that are in the painting. Even the gold moulding that may be around the painting, or the simple frame work that may be around a black and white drawing, cannot counteract the effect of that heavy design upon the walls.

In the Fine Arts Building; in the Educational Building, where they had innumerable objects of ornament and art; in the Liberal Arts Building, where among other things they had exhibits of statuary; in the Manufactures Building, where men sought to show to the best advantage the products of their mills; and in the Transportation Building, where everything from the locomotive to the automobile, was set forth to the best advantage,—you found everywhere the walls covered with the single tone. And almcst everywhere Burlap was used. Besides the strong thread effect and depth of color, it has the advantage of the single-tone and pushes out to the best advantage the thing that is set over against it. And that is in harmony with the New Art.

When we talk about New Art some of you gentlemen may feel like smiling,—perhaps a little contemptuously. I do not blame you. Like every other good idea it has had

its time of fantasy and fanaticism. The great apostle of the New Art, was William Morris. But Morris, like most reformers, went to the extreme. Those of you who are familiar with the history of Morris will remember the circumstances under which he made the great departure that has had such an influence upon the decorative work since his time. You remember how in company with his young friend, Edward Burne-Jones,—afterward Sir Edward Burne-Jones,—he went to London and they took that house on Red Lion Square, which had formerly been occupied by Rossetti. When Morris went out to get furniture, draperies and various decorative materials, with which to fit up his home, he found nothing which he considered consistent with the spirit of the age, especially the spirit that was moving in himself. So, in order that he might get things that were consistent and individual, he took up the work of designing what he wanted. The furniture he produced was a revival of the old monastic furniture, heavy, unwieldy and all too rigidly solid. It was more consistent with a monastery than a private house. Morris had, however, the advantage of having Rossetti come in, and Rossetti and Burne-Jones together painted beautiful pictures all over that furniture and made it, in that respect, very artistic.

Morris started a style, and that style, of course, caught certain people up. It was just like a whirlwind. You know what a whirlwind does. It catches up the light and useless odds and ends and all the dead leaves that lie inert upon the ground. It tosses them up in the air, whirling them round and round, and they make so great a showing for a little while, that one might almost be led to think that the air consisted altogether of dead leaves and refuse. In the world of thought it is just like that. Here are a lot of people of no consequence themselves, that lie dead and inert in the thinking world, but when a whirlwind of

thought comes, they are the first ones to be caught up and made prominent. So the New Art came into contempt because a lot of these no-account fanatics got active and made a great show and noise. You know what a lot of noise can be made by a very small aggregation.

I heard somebody tell a story some time ago of a man in a Southern city, who went to a hotel-keeper and said, "Say, Boss, I would like to sell you a ton of frogs. Don't you have to have frog's legs on your bill-of-fare?." The hotel man said, "Why, yes, but what on earth would I do with a ton of frogs? They would last me forever." "Well," the other man replied, "I don't know what you would do with them, but I would like to sell you a ton of frogs." The hotel-keeper being skeptical about the thing, said, "All right; go ahead, get your frogs; bring them along and I'll take them." So the fellow went out. A day or two afterwards he came back and had just six frogs, and he said to the hotel-keeper, "Here's your frogs." "Why," said the hotel man, "That's not a ton of frogs." "Well, this is all I could get, Boss, just six of them." "But," protested the hotel man, "You were talking about a ton the other day." "Well, Boss," said the man with the frogs, "I live right near this here meadow, and at night when them frogs was singin', it sounded to me like thar might be a millyun, and when I tried to ketch em,' thar was only six."

You know it is the same way with people sometimes,—and with movements,—there is such a noise made by a little coterie you would think the whole world was being agitated, when it may be only six active little frogs. So in the New Art, there was a little coterie that made a tremendous noise and confusion. You gentlemen heard the noise, and you could not see that there was anything but sound and fury there. Much of their work was not consistent with art in any sense, new or old art, and so you just turned the thing

down and said, "Well, if that is New Art, I don't want any of it." But remember, gentlemen, that whirlwind was started by the inrush of a certain spirit, and to-day that spirit, more fully understood and more sanely represented, is growing dominant in all art work, whether the fine arts or the decorative arts. It is this spirit with which we need to come into touch. We must get some of the inspiration of that spirit, and exemplify it in our work. It will give our work individuality, distinction, up-to-date-ness. It will increase our personal interest and pride in our work. It will also increase our profits.

You are a decorator, and a person with sufficient means comes to you and he says, "I want you to fit up my home." Well, you have been doing it year after year in the same old way. You know just the certain materials that it has been customary to use, the certain combinations of color that have been regarded as standard. You just go plodding along, using these old things in the old way.

How much better it is to do as a decorator told me the other day he did. A customer who had a fine home came to him and wanted him to redecorate it, and he said, "Yes, I will be glad to undertake the contract." The customer asked, "How much will it cost?" The decorator replied, "I don't know. I will promise you this: I will give it my best individual thought and care, and I will try to secure for you the results that I think you want, and that I am sure you will be satisfied with, and then the question of cost we can settle afterwards." The customer had confidence in him and gave him the contract.

He took that house room by room, and he made it different from any other house in the city. He used things that were new to the community; he used designs that had not been used there before,—new designs and things that were consistent with the spirit of the day. By giving it his individual thought and selecting these things that were in-

dividual, he produced what perfectly satisfied his patron. When the bill was presented, while the gentleman thought it was a little higher than he had anticipated, he said, "It is all right; we are perfectly satisfied. We have got something that is not repeated all the way up and down the street." And when Mrs. Jones goes in to see Mrs. Brown, Mrs. Jones will see that Mrs. Brown has something in the decorative way that Mrs. Jones has not, and of which she cannot find a duplicate in the town.

We have a customer down in a little town in Kentucky, I think—and you know Kentucky is not noted for her enterprise, as a rule; she is a good old State, and some things she makes down there are, perhaps, unapproachable; probably you gentlemen know more about it than I do. Kentucky is a conservative State. When you get into the small communities of any State, even grand old Pennsylvania, you find conservatism. But that fellow down in Kentucky has used at least three thousand yards of some of our highest priced materials right in and around that community, simply because he is determined not to be limited to mere paperhanging and commonplace everyday decorative work. He wants to rise above that, and to help his community to rise above it. So he gets the new things. If he needs wall paper, he will not take the old back stock that people try to work off on him; he wants the new goods, the newest ideas. If he needs sketches of decorative designs; if he needs wall coverings, or draperies, he gets new things and keeps in touch with the modern movements. The name and fame and profits of that man will grow.

If I had known I was to be called upon, I might have systematized my remarks a little. As it is they are but desultory. Still I am very glad to have this chance of suggesting to you as decorators—and artists more or less—that for your own personal benefit, for your business profit, for your future good, both personal and business, you should

get into touch with the modern spirit, that which lifts us out of ruts, out of slavery to mechanical details, inspiring us with beautiful and lofty conceptions of what is possible to us in our chosen sphere.

Let me suggest something that will serve to show the necessity now upon us for taking the broadest possible view of our opportunity.

In the educational exhibits at the great Fair, the fact that struck me most forcibly was that in the public schools of our country—and in your own home schools, I presume—they are now training the children in art. Beginning at the kindergarten and carrying the work systematically up through the various grades, they are teaching first, the principles, and, later, the application of those principles. The most complete system that I examined was, by the way, that of Utah. I suppose it is because they have large families there,—the family arrangements are peculiar, you know. But in all the States they are developing the art faculties of the children, and are educating the growing generation to be more intelligently critical of all artistic efforts or products.

It is not, however, merely the growing generation which is affected by this training. The children carry the new ideas into their homes. The parents, our patrons, are more or less influenced and educated.

The exhibits of the various schools of design were strikingly suggestive of the advanced character and high quality of the training furnished the young men and women who are fortunate enough to be able to attend them.

Gentlemen, this movement cannot be checked. No true lover of his art would check it if he could. It is far better that we should welcome it, cooperate with it, contribute our share to it, get our share of the value in it.

The leading manufacturers of painters' and decorators' supplies are doing what they can to foster and forward in-

telligent interest along these lines. Mr. Webster (of York) has spoken of the technical training which may be given to the apprentices in your shops if the master is willing to devote a part of his time and strength to that end. Let me add that very often the booklets and other reading matter sent out by the manufacturers are full of technical information, instruction or suggestion. These frequently go into the waste-basket without receiving the courtesy of a look. I know how busy each successful man is, and how little time he has at best for reading; but I would suggest that a little more pains be taken to see that things of real value are not cast away, things which you might well read yourselves, and put into the hands of those you are trying to train. I have over there at my booth some booklets [referring to the booklets on "Light, Color and Color Harmony," and "The Acoustic Properties of Rooms", by Dr. R. W. Cornelison, Chief Chemist and Superintendent for the Fab-Ri-Ko-Na Mills, and "The Modern House; Its Furnishings and Decoration" by Mr. John Taylor, of Glasgow, Consulting Art Director for the same Mills] which any decorator, however high up in his art may profitably read.

Finally, gentlemen, there is great moral and spiritual gain, as well as intellectual stimulus and financial profit, in accepting the inspiration imparted by these new ideals.

It is something, friends, to have a background against which the sordid and practical affairs of our life may be set. You know that the old Hebrews taught us many good lessons. They were a poetic people, a people who caught wonderful visions of higher things, and reported them for the benefit of posterity. A verse by their great Psalmist utters the very spirit of Hebrew poetry, and accounts for the best in the Hebrew life, when he says: "As the mountains are round about Jerusalem, so the Lord is round about His people, from henceforth, even forever." The idea is, of course, that as the mountains were the safeguard of the

city, so Jehovah was the protector of His people. But there is more than that in it. Being surrounded by the mountains, the dweller in the sacred city was always able to lift his eyes from the commonplaces of his daily task, and be quickened with a vision of that which was beautiful, lofty, enduring.

So it is, friends, with you and me. If we are to live lives that are full, lives that are strong to meet our duties, lives rich towards our fellowmen, we must have a background, something to look up to, something beautiful, lofty, enduring.

Feel that you are artists. Feel that you are in touch with the living art of to-day. Be willing to hear its message. Be willing to follow its leadings. Every day will be the brighter for it. All your work will be the better for it. And, when you finish your work, when you lay down the implements by which you have tried to make earth more beautiful, and go out to that "house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens" prepared for us by the Great Architect, and decorated by celestial workmen, you will feel that you have not lived and labored in vain.

You will feel that you have not been merely a part of the great industrial machine, but a part of the living spirit behind the machine; and you will leave your ideals, strengthened by experience, and your inspiration, justified by its fruits, as a precious heritage to those who in the future shall walk the paths that you and I now tread.

The booklets referred to by the speaker (see page 14) are a part of the educational propaganda now being carried on by the Fab-Ri-Ko-Na Mills, in connection with, but distinct from, their advertising.

We are profoundly impressed with the rapid development of both the decorating trade and the people at large in art perception, knowledge and taste, and we are confident that what someone has called "the American genius for ugliness" is no longer dominant.

It is our purpose to make our products keep pace with the art development of the time, and to do all we can to promote that development. In booklets, pamphlets, circulars, etc., we are making widely known the best ideas and suggestions of the highest authorities on decorative work. We are always glad to give advice concerning schemes of decoration, and to render assistance in the solution of special problems.

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